THE BIBLE -- GOD"S WORD TO MEN - Universal Bible Sunday, Dece. 9

Sunday after Sunday, y ear after year, church members hear srmons that have as their source a passage from the Bible./ In most cases the scriptural passage acts as a springboard for the sermon; it colors and shapes the sermon; and if it is a truly Biblical sermon it will come out at the same place as the passage in question./ The essential function of Protestant preaching is to intepret and apply the content[1] of the Bible to our contemporary situation./ This Sunday, however, I intend to deviate somewhat from the accepted procedure. Instead of using the Bible as a source--this morning it will be our subject.

Protestant ministers are guilty of the unwarranted assumption that all Protestants have a similar and a true conception of the Bible./ The whbole of Protestant worship revolves around the Bible and the assumption that the congregation knows why./ And we are guilty of the even shakier assumption that Protestants regularly read and study the Bible./ Personally I think these assumptions are false. I'm not so certain that we understand the role scripture plays in the life of the church. I'm not so certain you understand why the Bible is read as a part of worship. And I am even less certain that Protestants regularly read and study the Bible./ A recent survey, conducted by the Church of England, revealed the distrubing fact that the average Anglican Churchman, in good standing, spends a total of one hour a year reading yhe Bible./ Colonel Spencer Chapman, in his book, The Jungle is Neutral records how in Malaya during the war, whi le surrounded but concealed from the Japanese for a period of several months with nothing

whatever to do, he attempted to take in hand a task which he had promised himself many times to fulfill, namely to read the New TEstament. But when they tried to begin, he and his companions found they could make nothing of it. Instead they read the Oxford dictionary, their only other reading material, from cover to cover, but not the Bible.

It is highly ironical that the Bible is a perennial best seller; but the least read best seller in the English language. What do we believe about the Bible? What is the Bible anyhow? These are questions I hope to raise this morning. In doing so I recognize that answers are not easy; but I hope you will at least have something with which to approach the questions as they present themselves to you in your personal lives.

Throughout the Christian Church--Universal Bible Sunday is being observed. It is no accident that Bible Sunday falls on the second Sunday in Advent. Last week we discussed the Word become flesh in the miracle of the incarnation. We saw that the central Christian affirmation is that God has taken on the flesh of humanity in Jesus Christ. In this way he has spoken to men, expreseed himself, so to speak. The Gosepl of John has given us the explanation. ("The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, as of the only son of the father. ") The Christian belief about the Bible is very similar to this. In Jesus CHrist the Word was made flesh. In the Bible the word has been written down. Just as God has used Jesus Christ to confront men personally, so he uses the Bible for the same purpose; to confront

men; to express himself to men; to reveal to men his will for ther lives. If we had to answer the questions, "What is the Bible?" it would be in these terms. The Bible is a vessel. It is contained God;s self expression to men--God's word. Advent is the time when we celebrate God;s active participation in h uman history in Jesus Christ.He has done this also in a book: a book we call the Holy Bib;e.

It is no secret that people don't read the Bible, and so I will proceed, assumming you fall into that category, by asking , why? Certainly one of the reasons is the nature of the Biblical language itself. Until quite recently an interested Bible reader had to overcome the awesome barrier of reading in a linguistic style that very simply was not his own. In 1611 a group of scholars were commissioned by King James of England, to translate the Bible into English. This they did: and that the fruit of the labors, the King James Bible is is a masterpiece of Victorian English, no one qould deny. But for 350 years the King James Bible was the only version popularly available to the Christain reader. Over the years men became so accustomed to the lofty phraseology of this magnificent document that they were reluctant to t have the Bible retranslated. There is a grave danger here: the danger that has manifested itself in the ultra-conservative argument that says the King James version is the only legitimate translation : that the men who translated the words of the Bible into Victorian English were infallible inspired by God. It is good to rememeber that the books of the Bible, when they were written, were written in the vernacular of the time. They were written to be read and understood by all men: and that to insisit that one translation is ultimate is to betray the purpose for which the Bible was written in the first place.

There are many difficulties with the K.J. version. Language changes over a period of 350 years: some words have completely changed meaning in

that period of time. For instance the word "let" meant "hinder" in Victorian England. The K.J. version uses "prevent" to mean "precede": "allow"in the sense of "approve". The Greek word that means "immediately" is translated "anan" or "straightway" in the K.J. Bible. I have cited just a few: but thereare more than three hundred words in the K.J. version that today mean something totally differetn from what they meant 350 years ago. This alone necessitates a new translation: and demonstrates that the scriptures must continually be undergoing scrutinious retranslation to insure that the reader knows exactly what the autthor meant to say.

To illustrate the difficulty of style I want to read the same two verses to you from four different translations of the Bible. KJ. R.S.V.: published in 1952 and the One most widely used by Protestants today: The NEB., a recent atempt to retranslate the oldest mm manuscripts into contemporary English: and the J.B. Philips version, a translation by one man that is good in parts and not so good in ~~parts~~ others. The passage I will read is John 4: 34-36:

King James

Jesus saith unto them: my meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to do his work. Say not ye, There are four harvests, and then cometh the harvest? Behold i say to you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the ~~them~~ fields: for they are white already to harvest. And he that reapeth receiveth wages, ar and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: and both he that soweth and he that repeaeth may rejoice together.

R.S.V.

Jesus aid to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and tol accomplish his work. Do yoy not say, "There are yet four months, then comes the harvest'? I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest. He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.

N.E.B.

But Jesus said, 'It is meat and drink for me to do the will of him who sent me until I have finished his work. 'Do you not say, "Four months more and then comes harvest? But look, I tell you, look round on the fields; they are already white, ripe for harvest. The reaper is drawing his pay and gathering a crop for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.' ~~That is how the sawying comes true: "One sows, and another reaps."~~

J.B.P.

"My food is doing the will of him who sent me and finishing the work he has given me. Don;t you say, 'Four months more and then comes the harvest'? But I tellyou to open your eyes and look at the fields--they are gleaming white, all ready for the harvest! The reaper is already being rewarded and may be glad together.

The K.J. version is still the one most of us grew up on. The words still strike us deeply; and in this sense it will probably never be replaced as our devotional Bible. But at the same time anyone who wishes to know what really is here being said should own and read one of these other translations.

The second reason why the Bible is not widely read is a much deeper and more difficult one than word meanings. It drives us back to the very nature of the Bible--and to the startling discovery that a great many people simply don't know what the Bible is--and how to read it.

Nothing is more irritating than the person who knows a passage of scripture to meet every situation. It is quite possible to use bits and chunks of the Bible to prove anything. Lifted right out of context portions of the book of Revelation have been used to prove that the end of the world will occur on such and such a date. One can find Biblical proof texts to validate Democracy, Fascism and Communism. Witnout even looking very hard one can find verses that demand capital punishment; and others that say it is the worst sin of all to stand in judgement of another man. All this, of course, is done completely disregarding what the author intended to say in the first place, and is a very questionable use of the Bible.

The real problem existant today, however, is that involving the so-called contradictions between Biblical narrative and scientific fact. This problem is so prevalent and so explosive that I hesitate to even try to deal with it in this brief period; but at the same time I feel some things must be said. / I hope that you will follow what I understand am saying closely; and if a point arises that you don't ~~follow~~ that you will ask me about it later.

The problem began centuries ago as men of science delved into the mysteries of nature. / It came to a head in the 19th century with the scientific acceptance of the theory of Biological evolution. / The first three chapters of Genesis state that creation took place in seven days, that Adam and Eve were the first man and woman; and that sin entered the world through a serpant that convinced Eve to eat forbidden fruit. / Evolution, on the other hand, holds that creation as such took millions of years; that life as we now know it slowly evolved and perfected itself; and for that matter is now evolving and being perfected. / Immediately upon hearing this, churchmen, manned the battle stations; a godless science had profaned the Holy Bible; there could be no reconciliation. / The result of this conflict was that Christians sibibly retreated, hiding from the facts of science, behind a very shaky wall of Biblical literalism. / The Bible became, not the vessel of God's word--but a celestial book of facts, an accurate text book of biology, history, geology and physics. / Today this misuse of the Bible has not been eliminated; the battle still rages on and the church of Jesus Christ has suffered for it. / Even we, who consider ourselves intelligent Christians, have not dealt fairly with it. Our children still balk at the facts of science--and become involved in the

ridiculous debates of how the Sea parted, or the sun stood still, or how the serpent talked; or where Cain found a wife if his Mother and Fahher were the first humans created.

Put as succinctly and briefly as possible; the Bible is a book about God. It is a religious book, written by religious men, for the sole purpose of recording their experiences with the living God. The Bible is not a book of History. It is not a scientific text book. If you want to learn how cration took place, the place to go is a text book on geology or biology. / If you want to learn about the ancient empires of Babylon, Egypt and Assyria, got to a book on ancient history and anthropology. / But by the same logic that posits the validity of these disciplines, we see their inability to answer the questions of religion. / If you ~~at~~ wixh to read about God, if you want to know the why behind history and science the ~~pap~~ proper resource is the Bible.

A biological text book will explain how life evolved. The first chapter of Genesis will tell the why. / The Genesis creation accoun teals a profound story by the means of an illustration. / The points of the story are these; firstly that life exists because God created it; secondly tht man is the high point of creation, made in God's own image; thirdly that man has proven to be a disobedient creature and has abused the stature given him by the Creator. / Any more than this is to make the Bible into something it is not. / This sameprocedure and approach must be applied to the entire Bible. / Then it will come alive and in it we w will begin to hear the Word of God.

There is no conflict between Biblical Christianity and science. We welcome every new scientific inquiry into the nature and working of the

universe as further testimony to the magnificent handiwork of God. To be threatened by science; to hide behind the wall of literalism is simply to admit a basic ignorance of the very nature of the Bible.

We Presbyterians believe the Bible to be inspired by God. This word inspired has become a stumbling block also. Some have felt that inspired means literally true; and that every word is equally the result of divine inspiration. We believe that the men who wrote the Bible were inspired, some more than others. The words themselves are just the tools these inspired men used to express what they felt God was calling them to write.

What ~~the~~ proper way to read the Bible then? The Bible must be read two ways--studitously and dvotionally. The reader must bring to his task a basic understnding of what the Bible is; a scholar's openess to hear what the author is saying; and above all a believer's open ear to the living Word of God. To read one or two verses, chosen at random is to ~~write~~ invite disaster. The way to read is one book at a time, preferably in one sitting.

To assist you in your devotional reading the Session has decided to purchase the little magazine "Today." for every family in the Church. I hope that you will use it when it arrives; daily reading the Bible and the accompanying meditation, individually or preferably together as a family.

Included in our discussion of the Bible must be the Holy Spirit. To a non-believer the Bible is a lot of nonsense. To the Christian who approaches the Bible in faith it becomes the Word of God. By itself the Bible is just a book, accompanied by faith, by the willingness

to hear and to listen it becomes God;s instrument.

God has used the Bible to address men down through the centuries. Men have died for refusing to stop reading it. Men have been inspired, uplifted and encouraged as its words have come to them. / Martin Luther's pain staking study of Romans finally resulted in the discovery that incided the Reformation.

Today the Bible lies at the bottom of the Christian church; it is the foundation upon which we stand or fall. / In a personal encounter with Christianity the Holy Bible must play the same role. / It must be an open book--a book that is read and reread. It is the vessel of God's message; the instrument he uses in addressing mankind.

The Bible is a priceless gift; like his son Jesus Christ, the Bible is God's way ~~to~~ of speaking to us. I encourage and urge tyou to read it. As we approach the miracle of the word become flesh; let us realize that that word has been made available to us through the scriptures :- God's Holy Word

for we have seen thy love.

We thank thee O God, for all that thou hast given us - for life - its joys and sorrows, its successes and failures, for every minute of every day - the content of which we have only because thou hast given it to us.

We thank thee for the world in which we live, for the air we breathe, for the food we eat. We thank thee O God for companions and friends, for families and our homes

O Lord of life we are most grateful for the most glorious gift of all - thy son Jesus Christ. In him we have seen thee, in his death we have seen the extent of thy loving concern; in his resurrection we have known thy power and infinite care. In him we have seen that we may be sharers in a victory over death that his resurrection is symbolic of the eternal life that may be ours.

For all this we are grateful O Lord, our hearts brim over with thanksgiving and praise.

O thou who art the author of all things good we humbly ask that thy presence might be made manifest to us in all the days of our lives. Give us thy comforting assurance in a time of trouble, endow us with goodness and rightness in a time of decision; instill in us wisdom in carrying out our appointed tasks. Help us to radiate the love that thou hast demonstrated in our dealings with fellow men.

We pray O God - for knowledge, that we may choose the right from the wrong amidst lifes alternatives. We ask for courage and steadfastness that we may respond to all situations in a manner suitable in thy sight.

O God of mercy and loving kindness - we ask that thou wouldst be with those of our own number who are ill. Be with those all over the world who suffer bodily afflictions, may thy presence heal & comfort them in their time of stress.

O God of life be with the downtrodden and the oppressed; show to them - that no man can ever sink beneath thy loving concern, that they along with all thy creatures have been created by thee.

And now O Lord, we acknowledge our complete and utter dependence on thee - give us understanding of thee - only that we may be more effective instruments of thy will -

All this we pray, in the name of him whose name means savior - even Jesus Christ

Amen